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ABSTRACT

How can a writing program administrator (WPA) implement the "Statement of Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing," known as the Wyoming Resolution? Most administrators know that something like the resolution needs to be implemented, but they also know that the Statement lacks the wholehearted support of faculty colleagues and the upper administration. First-year English and advanced writing are commonly taught at the large university by full-time instructors and graduate students. A WPA could use the Statement to address the exploitation of this poorly paid workforce by offering an "incremental reality" plan containing reasonable criteria for promotion. Secondly, the WPA could rely on the "teaching conditions" section of the Statement in calling for smaller writing class sizes. The administrator would deny transfers of academic credits from schools that make a mockery of the teaching conditions guidelines. Cries for the WPA's removal, threats of lawsuits, charges of academic incompetence, and so on, would focus new attention on the unjust conditions that gave rise to the Statement. The call to action that began with the Wyoming Resolution now must go further, to include sanctions for noncompliance. (SG)

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Looking Left, then Right:

Administering the Wyoming Resolution

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The title we've given our talk today, "looking left, then right," with its echo of our mothers' instructions on how to cross the road without being hit, is an apt metaphor for a discussion of implementing the "Statement of Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing (College Composition and Communication, October 1989, 329-336)," the revised, official version of the Wyoming Resolution. Assuming that a Writing Program Administrator endorses the "Statement," how can she implement such principles and standards without being flattened or blindsided in the process?

This seems to be a daunting--indeed almost a crude--question to ask. Most all WPAs agree that this Statement, or something like it, needs to be implemented. And yet most of us know, in practice, that we won't win the wholehearted support of faculty colleagues when we look left or the unqualified endorsement of the upper administration when we look right . Indeed, we know some of our departmental colleagues, for example, instructors on one-year contracts renewable for a maximum of three or four years, are threatened by the Statement. To them, it jeopardizes their position, devalues their contribution, and disrupts their chosen career path--to teach a few years with an M.A. before deciding whether to pursue a Ph.D. or a career in highway administration.

Thus, today, we want to consider the "ideal" embodied in the Statement and the practical constraints that often dictate the way changes actually occur (or don't occur) on an institutional level. To do this, we will sketch two scenarios common to many college writing programs and speculate how the Statement might function in such contexts. We will address the practical constraints that hinder implementation along the following mixed metaphorical lines: if our goal is to implement the Statement, to get it and ourselves across the road, what are we going to do when the inevitable "practical" issues, the traffic of administrators, block

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the road? At what point do WPAs retreat and wait for the road to clear; when do we build a bridge or a tunnel? when do we organize a protest march to stop the traffic? when do we take on the whole system of highway commissioners and declare that if the roads are blocked, they are unsafe, and no one should travel on them. One method of stopping the traffic is to issue sanctions against institutions that are not in compliance with the Statement. The issue of sanctions will be the focus of our discussion.

The ideal/practical dichotomy which is often put on the table to slow or sidestep implementation of the Statement, is itself, we would argue, an ideological construct determined by a system of institutionalized inequities. And these inequities will remain unchallenged as long as we bow our heads in humble assent to the god of practicality. The Statement may attempt to abstract an "ideal" from compromises with institutionalized practicality, but in the immediate world of the WPA there are only inequities in pay and status for teachers, poor writing classes for students, and arguments for practicality which ensure that these conditions won't change.

When I first started thinking about writing this piece, I was reminded of Kenneth Burke's remark in A Grammar of Motives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) that "What goes forth as A returns as non-A" (4). This remark serves as caution to WPAs who might set forth a responsible agenda for change, only to see that agenda in practice end up making an already bad situation even worse. Most WPAs will begin close to home, by trying to get departmental endorsement of the Statement. To do so, a WPA must anticipate moves and counter moves as well as negotiate priorities with all the cunning she can muster. Only by possessing the negotiating instincts of a Donald Trump could a WPA hope to succeed. Not only is this a chilling model of the art of rhetoric as negotiation, it is a model of rhetoric that the practical/ideal ideological structure encourages because it leaves that structure systematically unchallenged. The Donald Trump model of rhetorical negotiation is better suited to building casinos rather than principles and standards for an academic community.

I want to propose another model of rhetoric for use by WPAs, not of the cunning rhetorician, but of the amateur rhetorician. Drawn from Bertolt Brecht's theories of acting, the amateur is one who does not operate within the existing conventions of the medium and who therefore exposes and subverts the modus

operandi. As we seek to implement the Statement, we should at points become amateur rhetoricians, amateur administrators if you will, who think and speak, as Brecht suggests, crudely.[1] Rhetors who don't seem to understand the social customs and the unwritten rules. Rhetors who counter the smooth, reasonable, custom-bound arguments of the contented with talk that usually does not make it into administrative discourse--talk of exploited labor, institutionalized second-class citizenship, and of an educational experience for students which is at best severely compromised by the silences of the system. Such is the rhetorical task of the always amateur writing program administrator.

Scenario 1: or, "What's good for the gander ain't necessarily good for the goose."

Our first scenario involves a large English department in a research university with an M.A. graduate program, a department which must staff numerous sections of the required two-semester first-year English sequence and the one-semester advanced writing requirement in addition to a wide range of literature and writing courses for majors and nonmajors. The means of doing so is with a substantial number of instructors (let's say about thirty) and graduate student TAs (again, about thirty). The department hires few, if any, part-time instructors. This is a relatively benevolent system of oppression; these full-time instructors have contracts renewable up to a maximum of four years, they actually have health insurance and retirement funding, and they have full voting privileges on departmental matters. Nonetheless, the following issues are immediately problematic: job security (the positions are permanent but the people filling them are not) and pay inequity (these instructors teach four courses a semester and receive $10,000 or 40% less than new assistant professors who teach three). In short, a WPA could use the Statement to address both the exploitation of labor and the migrant labor mentality at work here.

The WPAs tactic to counter these inequities would be to put forth an "incremental reality" plan -- a tenure plan for instructors, for example, perhaps a plan with reasonable criteria for promotion to assistant professor with tenure after the required years of service. The plan determines x number of instructor positions to be permanent based on course demand over the last five years and projected demands. The plan recognizes annual performance reviews and corresponding salary adjustments. The plan has a reasonable time-table for implementation. The WPA feels she is beginning to cross the road, but unavoidable bridgework needs to be done.

The departmental faculty must discuss it first. One colleague quietly asks if the WPAs plan doesn't go against the intent of the Statement, the professionalization of the discipline. "If we going to pay these people fair salaries, give them tenure-track status and reasonable teaching loads, then why shouldn't we just hire assistant professors with Ph.Ds to begin with?" The department head wants to know what these newly tenured faculty will teach for the next thirty years? Will they only teach first-year English courses or will they share in the teaching of major courses and electives? Will they vote and fully participate in activities concerning the graduate program--or will they maintain their de facto second-class status? The instructors listen intently, then caucus, and announce that they have decided to vote in a block against the proposal--they fear it will cause them more harm than good. The WPA is feeling very much like her Plan A was becoming Burke's Plan non-A.

Let us assume, however, our amateur administrator has pushed all the right buttons and countered all the practical reasons for not considering change, and that Plan A has been adopted by the department and the university--in the abstract, of course. But budgetary constraints must delay the implementation of the plan. The sections of composition still need staffing however, and no one wants to be so insensitive as to violate the program that everyone worked so hard to get passed. What to do? Obviously, this is the point for negotiation, some give and take on numbers. The department will delay the implementation of the plan if the university administration will significantly raise instructors' salaries. The bridge holds for the time being.

But, let's take this a bit further, and here I'm drawing from Killingsworth, Langford and Crider's article which appeared in the ADE Bulletin (Winter 1989, 33-39); the most likely circumstance to develop out of such a situation is an administrative sidestep. Rather than compromising with the WPA and the department, the administration would propose to staff the sections with graduate students, which only by coincidence happens to be a cheaper solution. The administration, of course, has only the interests of the department in mind; it is suggesting, that because of statistics on the one hand which show more students choosing to study liberal arts, and statistics on the other hand which show a critical shortage of humanities Ph.Ds in the late 1990s, that the department ought to strengthen its research base and graduate program by admitting increased numbers of willing students supported by teaching assistantships to the graduate program. And

because the department has not really reached consensus on the status of teaching writing, it is now divided. The expansion of the graduate program is a summum bonum in the English Department because it can now run more seminars and thus free more literature faculty from the menial task of teaching first-year writing. What's good for the gander ain't good for the goose.

The WPA is now isolated. By arguing for the rights of instructors she is arguing against growth of the graduate program, and most members of the faculty equate professional status with the size and quality of the graduate program. What began as a move to challenge exploitation of labor ends as further entrenchment (Plan A has indeed become Plan non-A). We're not across the road, we're in a ditch. And as much as I'd like to think a discussion of professional status or the bluntness of the amateur rhetorician would pull us out of the ditch, I don't believe it. Successfully implementing the Statement depends fundamentally on an aggressive English community at all ranks who oppose the ideology that teaching writing is not a real profession (untrained TAs without prior experience can do do it; instructors should do it for only four years; we assume this a way station in your career; you'll go on or should go on to something better; work in writing won't lead to tenure here). Such a conversion in most English departments is not imminent. When the WPA is effectively isolated--having to lobby for a program that is perceived as adjunct and in some sense inferior to the real business of the department, the only way to cross the road may be to establish procedures for monitoring compliance with the Statement and issuing sanctions against those who institutionalize abuses.

Scenario 2: or, The Always Amateur Administrator Considers the Impossible

The second scenario involves a WPA who has had reasonable success with the "teaching conditions" section of the Statement within her own department and college. The statement recommends that no more than 20 students should be permitted in any writing class, and her program averages 20 per section, although some sections might have as many as 22 students. Developmental sections should be limited to 15 according to the Statement, and her program now limits them to 17. No English faculty should teach more than 60 writing students a term, and that is generally true of the faculty in her department. Even the instructors who teach four sections generally teach only three sections of writing and one section of sophomore literature. Although some instructors share offices, there are no more than two instructors in any one office. All tenure-track faculty have private offices. All teachers have equal access to support

services for the teaching of writing, including supplies, duplication services, and secretarial assistance. There is more to be done, for sure. But her program has taken steps to comply with The Statement, and it continues its commitment to further improvements.

But she knows from talking to faculty in other two and four-year colleges in her state that many colleges are not even close to compliance, and conditions appear to be getting worse instead of better. She has a friend who works part-time at the two-year college up the road where part-time faculty are paid by the contact hour. $15.00 a contact hour. For a ten-week academic quarter, he receives $600 a course. He is given no office space, and indeed, faculty at this school routinely tell students that they can't meet with them after class to talk about their writing--they have no office space, and they are not paid or expected to do so. They are not technically paid to prepare for class or respond to student writing either, but most of them accept such chores as part of their obligation. Another friend works at a four-year college where full-time faculty teach five courses a semester; they often teach an overload of 6 courses for extra pay. Most full-time teachers at this college teach 5 or 6 sections of writing per semester in sections that average around 30. The WPA knows that faculty at her institution regularly complain that students who transfer from these institutions don't seem as prepared as they should be.

As part of her routine duties, our WPA certifies transfer-credit from other schools. Does this second-term writing course satisfy the requirements for our second-term writing course? To determine this, our WPA could simply examine catalog descriptions as is traditionally done and inevitably sign approval as her successors have always done. She knows that once she completes a single evaluation, the admission's office will accept that college's transfer credit and not bother her with any more paperwork. At her institution, control of the curriculum (not the budget, not personnel decisions, but the curriculum) rests with the faculty, and the control of the departmental curriculum and graduation requirements rests with the departmental faculty, as endorsed by the appropriate college committees.

But our amateur administrator begins to take seriously this evaluation process. She gets the composition committee to define the goals and expectations for their first-year English sequence--an academic experience based on the Statement in the sense that it assumes, in addition to our traditional

expectations about research skills, argumentative writing, etc., that teachers can give students such a course only when they teach a maximum of 60 writing students in any one term, etc. The entire department endorses her committee's revised course description and course guidelines.

For what follows next, I am indebted to Susan Miller and colleagues from Utah who have been considering such a plan of action. Armed with her departmental guidelines, our WPA now refuses to grant transfer-credit to schools that are making of mockery of the Statement. She does not demand, say, a maximum limit of 60 writing students per teacher per term. She arbitrarily doubles the limit, at least at first. If teachers at a certain school teach more than 5 sections of writing per term, or more than 120 writing students per term, or don't even have access to a desk on campus with which to conference with students about their writing, then students on these campuses have not taken a course equivalent to the course offered by her department. She notifies the office of admissions of colleges whose courses do not satisfy the requirements and for which no transfer credit can be granted. She is, of course, Brecht's Amateur Administrator who has no idea of the consequences of her action. She has no idea how much trouble she can get into by just doing her job the way it should be done, rather than by doing her job by accepting the institutionalized silences that have become habitual and now necessary for the system to function. Amid the cries for her removal, the threats of law suits, the summons to the President's office, the charges of academic incompetence, the threats of institutional retaliation, she will know that she has focused more attention on the deeply unjust conditions which prompted the Statement to be written in the first place than all the talking and pleading and committee meetings the institutional ideology can imagine. It may even seem for a brief while that the traffic has stopped, if only to allow the administration to patiently explain to her the advantages of not crossing the road, advantages an afterall amateur administrator might not have considered. Another lesson in how to think like a gander.

Conclusion

So where does this journey through two scenarios leave us? WPAs are indebted to the Wyoming Committee for drafting the Statement and getting the endorsement of so many English professional organizations. There are undoubtedly many good reasons why, at this stage of the process, the committee's final version does not mention sanctions or penalties for noncompliance. But we would like to

emphasize that we see this effort as a process, and that somewhere along the line there need to be consequences for noncompliance, whether through accrediting agencies, a professional society, a state organization, or an individual English department examining its own practices and those of institutions with which it has educational agreements. Our profession has produced such documents before, such as the "ADE's Guidelines of Teaching Loads and Class Sizes," and they have served useful purposes, particularly in institutions in which faculties are committed to self-monitoring and self-improvement and have the power to negotiate changes. But the call to action that began with the Wyoming Resolution goes beyond a call for critical self-reflection. It is a call for praxis--to improve education for all college writing students by challenging institutional and disciplinary ideologies and practices which conspire against such improvement.

We do not endorse sanctions for noncompliance lightly, and indeed no suggestion which creates a need for a system of organized "monitoring" should be made lightly. I had a conversation with a colleague who recently investigated becoming a high school English teacher. She has a B.A. and M.A. degree in English, nine years of successful college-level teaching, and experience editing a state English journal. The State Department of Education estimated that with two-years of full-time study at the undergraduate level, including a semester of practice teaching, she could earn certification to teach English in high school. This is self-serving professionalism run amuck--a system which insures that competent professionals will have a hard time crossing the road. We do not think that professional monitoring must inevitably lead to substantial abuse of our original intentions--that Kenneth Burke's A will inevitably become non-A. We think, rather, that a system of sanctioning will allow us to address, finally, and with some force, the conditions that prompted the drafting of the Wyoming Resolution in the first place. We do not expect agreement from all quarters regarding this suggestion. To some of our colleagues in English departments, this suggestion will be threatening, will be read as a "power move." We would answer that the field of composition studies, of all fields, has had "felt experience," with the where-with-alls of power. And in any event, wouldn't it be nice to have so much power to do good that we become susceptible to abusing it!

Note

1. For a discussion of Brecht and rhetoric, see Terry Eagleton, Against The Grain (London: Veiso, 1986), pp. 167-172.